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Hostility in the Cockpit

By Lt. Justin Collins

I was a new H2P, and this flight just was my second time completing deck-landing qualifications (DLQs). My first DLQs were a year earlier at the fleet-replacement squadron (FRS). The crew had night-vision goggles (NVGs), but with an illumination level of 1 percent, the NVGs provided little assistance to our situational awareness (SA); they felt more like an obstruction. All my senses were peaked as we made our way back to the ship after a two-hour mission and transitioned to the DLQ phase.

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To improve our SA, we decided to extend our final to two miles, rather than the normal one and two-tenths miles, and we used forward-looking-infrared radar (FLIR) to assist our lineup on the ship. Once the ship set flight quarters, we decided to shoot several practice approaches while we waited for a green deck.

The helicopter-aircraft commander (HAC) completed the first approach, and I flew the second. As we set up for our third approach, we received a green deck to begin multiple approaches and landings to complete our DLQ requirements. The HAC began the first approach, and all was going well as we passed through a half-mile. Our closure rate was slow, but we had briefed to complete the approach slower than normal because of the lack of illumination and my relative inexperience. As we closed the ship, our CRM was decreasing faster than our DME.

At two-tenths of a mile from the ship, I saw we were at 70 feet, about 40 feet low, and closing at only 10 knots. The HAC was on instruments, and I was scanning—mostly outside. As we slowly approached the back of the boat, the HAC scanned outside, so I shifted my scan more to the instruments. We practically were hovering at two-tenths of a mile behind the boat when I saw the radar altimeter rapidly decrease below 60 feet. I immediately called, "Power… power… power!" At the same time, I increased collective. This action startled my HAC, who wisely waved off. I was about to witness the worst example of cockpit relationships I ever hope to see.

On our downwind, the HAC and I discussed what just had occurred. I explained what I had seen, but the HAC was infuriated I had come on the controls and increased power. The HAC thought the approach was fine, and what I had seen was not correct because we had the ship made. This assessment may have been right, but the HAC never made any call that indicated we were approaching the back of the ship, or that we had the deck made. I simply did what I thought was correct and increased power to stop our descent. After being reprimanded for my action, we continued to our next approach to the deck. It

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was a replay of the first one. We were at two-tenths of a mile from the ship with zero knots closure, and I was offering little assistance. My assertiveness was decreased acutely after the scolding I had received. The HAC waved off, and we took it around. I was not doing as much to back up my HAC at this point, and we reached an all-time low in CRM with a crew that still needed to land on the ship.

Our next approach went better, although no thanks to me, as I virtually sat on my hands and gave little assistance. Once over the deck, the HAC tried to land in the RSD and mistrapped. The HAC lifted into a hover, again mistrapped, and lifted once more. I said very little as the HAC tried to get comfortable, hovering over the deck. I could sense the HAC's frustration, and to my surprise, I began to receive another lecture about the approach where I had increased power. I said nothing, but our cool-headed aircrewman spoke up, "Let's get this on deck and talk about it later."

I still needed another approach and two landings for my currency qualification. As a crew, we decided to put all of our disagreements aside and finish with another approach and two landings. They were uneventful, and everything was completed.

In the debrief, the HAC continued to tell me what I had done was wrong and was due to my inexperience. I thought maybe she was right. We finished after an hour or so, and I later reflected on what had occurred. But, I never vocalized my concerns to other HACs on our detachment. This omission proved to be a big mistake, because a few weeks later, I was scheduled to fly another NVG flight with the same HAC on a night with low illumination. During the brief, the HAC became angry with me for not completing preflight calculations. I saw that same frustration already was brewing, and I realized this person may not be in condition to fly on another stressful night. After all, my inexperience and the HAC's frustration had led to dangerously poor crew coordination just a few weeks earlier. I ended up refusing to fly with her that night.

The first lesson I learned is that pride never should get in the way of someone speaking up or taking action if they see something unsafe. This pride goes for both of us. As a junior H2P, I should have spoken up and admitted I was out of my comfort box at the beginning of the DLQs. My HAC may have had better knowledge and could have prepared mentally, instead of jumping right to frustration. The HAC should not have reacted with such anger once I came on the controls and increased power. My reaction to what I had perceived as an unsafe situation should not have been interpreted as a personal attack on the HAC's flying skills. We are supposed to be dual-piloted, not dueling pilots.

The cockpit has little room for anger and frustration. All pilots have heard of compartmentalization. If another pilot does something that one finds frustrating, then that person needs to put it in the back of his or her mind and address it at the debrief. Some things have to be dealt with immediately, but introducing hostility into an already high-risk environment is just poor headwork.

We also learned the importance of communication. I should have said I was uncomfortable. Also, one of us should have shown some leadership and said it would be best discussed at the debrief. Our aircrewman demonstrated leadership by speaking up, which helped defuse the situation. My reaction to the HAC's frustration and anger was to clam up and say very little. I failed to pass important information, such as line-up and forward calls, which degraded our SA.

Finally, I failed to voice my concern with the OinC and other HACs on the detachment in a human-factors council (HFC) or standardization board. If I had, the OinC could have made adjustments or implemented controls that may have mediated a similar situation from occurring in the future. Instead, the OinC did not learn of the sequence of events until a few weeks later when I rightfully refused to fly with the same HAC, who was angry with me before we even had launched. This resulted in a cancelled flight and reduced readiness.

Lt. Collins flies with HSL-49.